



**domestic  
abuse  
commissioner**

Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales  
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10 July 2024

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
20 Great Smith St  
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State,

I would like to warmly welcome you to your new roles as Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities. Since my appointment as the first Domestic Abuse Commissioner in September 2019, I have had the privilege to act as an independent voice for adult and child victims and survivors of domestic abuse, drawing on my 30 years' experience in domestic abuse services, policy and intervention. I have used my statutory powers, which are set out in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to hold both agencies and government to account in tackling domestic abuse and to raise public awareness.

I noted with interest your previous role as Secretary to the APPG on Domestic and Sexual Violence and your membership of the Home Affairs Select Committee, as well as your work at Wearside Women in Need prior to your parliamentary career. The experience of frontline practice and understanding of the landscape of domestic abuse support drawn from these roles will be invaluable in your new position, bolstering the Department for Education's understanding of and response to domestic abuse. Your leadership of the Department will be truly transformational as the new Government embarks on its ambitious mission to halve VAWG within a decade.

### ***Children as victims of domestic abuse***

The most recent prevalence survey estimated that 1 in 5 children are living with domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 took the landmark step forward of recognising these children as victims in their own right for the first time. However, to date, the Department has done little to support or guide agencies locally to address a chronic lack of awareness or clarity as to what this means in practice, and children's legal status as victims has brought little tangible change.

You will understand all too well the devastating and long-term impact of abuse on victims and their families. By the Home Office's own assessment cost society approximately £81bn in a single

year.<sup>1</sup> However, this figure does not consider the cost to child victims, the cost of the emotional and mental health impacts, nor the significant and potentially long-term consequences of experiencing domestic abuse in childhood and adolescence.

### ***The role of the Department for Education***

Responding to domestic abuse is everybody's business; every part of the local community and every statutory agency has a role to play, in partnership with specialist services. In the same way, an effective national response to domestic abuse requires a multi-disciplinary approach which utilises the whole of the government's apparatus. As set out in your manifesto's 'mission led' approach, tackling domestic abuse must be a genuine cross-Departmental priority for this new Government - working together to fully harness levers of change, overseen by robust governance and accountability and driven from the very heart of Government.

The Department for Education has a critical role to play. I welcomed in your recent Manifesto a number of commitments which I would be pleased to work on with you collaboratively. These include in particular the commitment to the provision of specialist mental health professionals in every school and to ensuring schools address misogyny and teach about healthy relationships and consent. Enabling schools to become a safe space for children to disclose their experiences and giving children the knowledge and skills to identify domestic abuse are key components of the Coordinated Community Response. I am grateful that these will be delivered by this new Government and look forward to discussing them further with you and your Officials.

### ***Opportunity for change***

Support for children and young people is one of my top priorities as Commissioner, and my team is currently embarking on an ambitious research, policy and practice report that will map provision of services, understand best practice, offer policy solutions, and reflect the voices of children themselves. Front-line workers have been extensively engaged to ensure my recommendations are practicable and based in the reality of operational work.

This report is due to publish in January 2025, but in the meantime I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the recent briefing I shared with Officials in your Department, which sets out my current key issues, priorities and recommendations. This briefing is attached to this correspondence for your reference, and I have sent similar briefings to your colleagues across Government on their Departmental responsibilities.

The briefing highlights the alarming prevalence of domestic abuse cases in the social care system. Children's Social Care assessments record domestic abuse in around 50% of cases, which is the most common adverse background factor listed for children deemed in need of support. This figure is widely believed to be underestimated. Despite this, social workers reported, during roundtables held by my office, only receiving a day of training on domestic abuse, and difficulty spotting the signs of controlling and coercive behaviour. Similarly, teachers and Designated Safeguarding Leads also reported a lack of training and confidence in effectively handling disclosures and conversations around domestic abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on 2016 analysis, adjusted to 2023/24 prices.

This is compounded by the lack of specialist support services for children who have experienced domestic abuse, with my previous [mapping](#) finding that just 29% of victims who wanted support for their child were able to access it.

As a result of this fractured system, children are falling through the cracks and not receiving the statutory and non-statutory support which they deserve. As a result, I recommend that the Department:

1. Instigates coordinated strategic leadership across Government to deliver a truly effective and holistic response to children as victims of domestic abuse. The starting point is convening a cross-Government working group, to drive policy and practice improvements for children subject to domestic abuse. This group can oversee delivery of recommendations from my Office when made in January 2025.
2. Support schools and education providers to contribute fully to the multi-agency response to domestic abuse. This should start by rolling out a [Whole Schools Approach](#) in every school, a key component being the development of a robust RSHE curriculum and behavioural policies that reinforce this. I noted with keen interest your recent speech on tackling misogyny in schools, and look forward to working with you further on this.
3. Transform the Department's response to domestic abuse, including through flagship programmes and Children's Social Care. This must be done in collaboration with the specialist domestic abuse sector, and take into account my policy recommendations.

I urge you to read this briefing in full and give my recommendations your careful consideration. I believe that they are an imperative step towards achieving ambitious change that child victims and survivors both need and deserve. If my recommendations were to be taken on board in full and every child was supported to recover and received an integrated and comprehensive response from every part of the system, we could expect educational outcomes to increase, exclusions to reduce and more young people to be in education, employment or training.

### ***Working together***

I look forward to working with you closely as you embark in your new role to deliver an effective response to domestic abuse and support child victims and survivors. My Office works independently of any organisation or political party to amplify the voices of victims and survivors of domestic abuse. My small team of domestic abuse experts develop policy, conduct research, and collect practitioner insight to ensure that we remain at the forefront of understanding of what victims and survivors need, and are well placed to offer solutions. We remain available to you and your colleagues across Government to engage and advise on all issues relating to domestic abuse - as well as to facilitate, wherever needed, invaluable connections to the specialist sector and to victims and survivors themselves.

I would like to take the opportunity of a new Government to deepen my engagement with the Department for Education's Ministers, given the priority needed to improve support and systems for child victims of domestic abuse. Equally, I would encourage you to consider how your

Department works internally to address violence against women and girls and domestic abuse, given the reach of this issue across the Department.

I would warmly welcome a discussion at your earliest convenience on all of these important issues.

Yours sincerely,

Nicole Jacobs

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicole Jacobs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales**